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ABSTRACT

Informal assessment ties evaluation and teaching together. Through systematic observation, teachers gather useful, instructional information as learners engage in the processes of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Informal assessment measures suggested by researchers and language arts teachers include anecdotal records, informal inventories, running records, conferences, writing samples, observational checklists, think-aloud protocols, and self-assessment. Several specific strategies for organizing informal assessment have been found to be useful: using an expandable file folder to store the variety of assessment measures; placing the file folders in an easily accessible location in the classroom; and creating an organizational sheet to help teachers focus on the goals of instruction and instructional strategies. Using informal assessment successfully depends not only on the organized use of a variety of measures for assessment, but also on the accurate interpretation of the information gathered. Using multiple measures in an organized, systematic procedure allows teachers to make accurate, informed decisions based on various assessment instruments. (Five figures representing various informal assessment measures are included.) (RS)

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Informal Literacy Assessment:
An Organized Meld of Evaluative Information

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Abstract

Informal assessment ties evaluation and teaching together. Through systematic observation, teachers gather useful, instructional information as learners engage in the processes of reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

An organizational sheet allows teachers to use multiple informal assessment measures in an organized manner where information gathered is interpreted and used based on patterns of behavior.

INFORMAL LITERACY ASSESSMENT

AN ORGANIZED MELD OF EVALUATIVE INFORMATION

Effective literacy assessment ties evaluation and teaching together. As I look back on my teaching experiences in the 1970's and 80's, I realize now how those ties were never considered. From mastery learning to standardized testing, product assessment yielded comparative scores, percentiles, the number of mastery level objectives passed, or other similar quantitative measures of information. These measures were one method for obtaining information about learning, but indicated a limited, incomplete view of the child as a learner. They provided little useful information for my classroom instruction. Any ties between teaching and this form of evaluation were minimal, coincidental, or nonexistent. Educators now realize that evaluation needs to be tied to teaching. Sound informal literacy assessment orchestrates evaluation and teaching resulting in information that can be used in the classroom for planning, instruction, and remediation. Informal assessment and instruction are not separate and distinct, but are continuous and cyclic (Winograd & Paris, 1988; Valencia & Pearson, 1987). Otherwise, results are irrelevant and nonbeneficial to teachers. Fortunately, literacy assessment is changing to reflect this new view. This article addresses informal assessment measures that

allow teachers to gain information about individual student progress and then use the information to make enlightened decisions regarding teaching and learning. It also describes an effective procedure that teachers can use to organize these assessment measures as well as guidelines for effectively interpreting and using the multiple measures in their classrooms.

Procedures for informal assessment

Formal, standardized testing is designed for placing individuals along a continuum, or comparing one learner's performance against some normed, standardized group. Without a doubt, formal assessment of literacy learning is here to stay. There is a place for such classification in evaluation, but fortunately, teachers also have available to them multiple informal assessment measures that can be used to provide practical, instructional information. Informal assessment offers teachers information for bringing performance closer to potential. Sound instructional practices indicate that a learner's prior knowledge, attitudes, motivations, self-perceptions, and level of skills and strategies must be examined before instruction or remediation occurs. Informal assessment allows teachers to assess these areas gathering useful, instructional information through systematic observation as learners engage in the processes of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Students play an active role in the process by

participating in classroom activities for the purpose of discovering strengths and needs.

Researchers and teachers of the language arts suggest numerous approaches for informal assessment (Clay, 1979; Flood & Lapp, 1989; Winograd & Paris, 1988). Several of the most effective measures include:

* anecdotal records: notes kept by teachers on individual students over a period of time to document student behavior while learning in self-selected and teacher-selected materials. Using Yetta Goodman's "kidwatching", teachers observe students, recording individual progress and possible areas of remediation. Commonly used formats for anecdotal records include spiral binders, file folders, and looseleaf notebooks on which the teacher notes the date, type of activity observed, and descriptions of significant observations. (see Figure 1)

Insert Figure 1 about here

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* informal inventories: graded passages with questions for observing specific reading behaviors. Many teachers use informal inventories that are developed and sold commercially. The procedure includes silent and then oral reading of a selected section of text by

a child, followed by a series of questions to determine a child's ability to attend and recall the information presented in the passage. Teachers can develop their own informal inventories by using passages from trade books or magazines. Questions that assess comprehension should accompany each passage. It is imperative that the questions assess more than factual information. Initially using the comprehension questions from commercially prepared inventories as guidelines for question development will help insure that a variety of questions are included.

* running records: while students read a passage orally, the teacher marks miscues. This procedure, sometimes called miscue analysis, is included in a commercially prepared informal reading inventory. As an alternative, a teacher may choose to select the material read by students instead of using one commercially prepared. If this is done, then it is important that both the teacher and student have a copy of the text. The teacher can follow along as the student reads, recording miscues in a systematic manner. See Figure 2 for an example of a running record. Compilation of the information from a running record should be recorded on a running record checklist. (see Figure 3) Then the teacher can

focus on only those miscues that indicate a lack of comprehension. The summary section as well as the column labeled " loss of meaning" on the running record checklist aids the teachers in identifying the miscues for analysis.

Insert Figures 2 and 3 about here

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* conferences: meetings between teacher and student (or a group of students) to discuss individual or group work. The teacher asks questions, provides assistance, and records students' strengths, areas of weakness, and needs for instruction. Interviews are useful as a tool for further individualized instruction. Teachers can interview students to measure the degree of understanding and to allow students to retell or explain a process prior to engaging in the activity. The teacher records the information collected from this conference in a binder or journal similar to the one used for anecdotal records.
* writing samples: collection of writing samples over a period of time to indicate areas of growth in both the content and mechanics of writing. Teachers ask students to write sample pieces especially for collection where students are

encouraged " ... to show all they know how to do when they write: using capitals, punctuation, titles, interesting leads, etc." (Baskwill & Whitman, 1988). Writing samples at different stages of the writing process can also be included. Each sample should be dated to allow comparison over time. A file folder or binder can be used to store these samples as well as the summary sheet for comparison. (see Figure 4)

Insert Figure 4 about here

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* observational checklists: a list developed by the teacher that focuses on specific behaviors during learning. Usually the behaviors are based on the objectives of the lesson or activity. The teacher can combine these checklists with samples of the student's work to provide an accurate record of progress in specific areas of learning. These checklists can serve as a reference to specific objectives but will ultimately lead to additional, more spontaneous observations: "...questions that arise as you interact with the children, comments that give you insight into their thinking or learning, snippets of your own thoughts and reflections on the observations you record" (Baskwill & Whitman, 1988).

- **think-aloud protocols**: students are asked to think-aloud while engaged in a process of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The teacher listens and observes while the students tell what they are doing during a specific process. This procedure not only allows the teacher to focus on strengths and needs of individual students, but also to determine if the process itself needs to be demonstrated or modeled for the student. Teachers record information from think-aloud protocols in a journal or binder similar to the one used for anecdotal records.
- **self assessment**: students evaluate their own progress based on a written report, a scoring system, or a series of answers to questions. Wixson et al. (1984) found self assessment of students' progress to be an effective way to gather information. Flood and Lapp (1989) suggest the following questions as examples to be included in a self assessment reading instrument: "(1) How well do you think you do in reading? (2) What do you do when you try to read a hard word? (3) How do you select your own reading material?"

Procedure for organizing informal assessment

Although there are multiple possibilities for organizing informal assessment measures, there are several

specific strategies that I have found most useful. First, it is important to select expandable file folders that can be labeled with individual students' names. This expandable portfolio will easily store a variety of informal assessment measures. A regular letter-size file folder should be included in each expandable file folder to hold the organizational sheet (see Figure 5). A cardboard box, covered with brightly colored contact paper provides a storage place for all expandable folders. It should be located in an easily accessible location in the classroom where both students and the teacher can contribute to portfolios on a continuous basis as well as use them to assess progress or patterns of needs. Students should be encouraged to examine their portfolio frequently.

Insert Figure 5 about here

The organizational sheet, which should be kept in a file folder in the larger expandable portfolio, allows teachers to focus on goals of instruction and instructional strategies used to achieve those goals. It is designed to give teachers the flexibility of assessing students' performance across several instructional strategies. It also allows teachers to evaluate students on individualized instructional goals and to easily keep track of those individual records. The first column provides the teacher with a place to record the date of informal assessment. The

column titled "Goal for Instruction" is used to name the broad area of focus for the individual student. An example might be "comparing and contrasting two books written by the same author". The third column, "Instructional Strategies", may include such items as a story map showing how the books are alike, a story map showing how the books are different, a written response to reading describing the main characters of both books accenting the characters' similarities and differences, and a time-line depicting span of time in both books. The fourth column, "Assessment Measures", gives the teacher a place to record the assessment measure used. This measure could be either required evidence or supporting evidence for the goal. The required evidence allows teachers " ... to look systematically across students as well as within each student" (Valencia, 1990). Examples of this assessment may include a specific observation checksheet, a sample of the student's work such as a response to reading describing the main characters of the two books, or any other informal assessment measure tied to the identified goal. "Supporting evidence is additional documentation of learning to include in the portfolio" (Valencia, 1990) and may include self selected or teacher selected samples of the student's work. It allows teachers and students the flexibility to include a variety of measures that may expand on the more systematic assessment. The final column, "Comments", is used to record any information the teacher feels is relevant to the student's

performance of the specific learning activity. This column may be filled in during actual observation, or may be filled in later after the teacher peruses a sample of the student's work. Examples of various comments may include, "story map: complete for differences, incomplete for similarities", "see writing sample dated 3/4/91", or "student unsure of characters' similarities". The organizational sheet gives teachers a written record of a specific goal identified for observation, the date of each observation, the assessment measure(s) used, and a relevant comment(s) on the student's performance. It allows teachers to keep an organized summary of the information collected and placed in the expandable file folder.

As teachers use the information in the portfolio for evaluation of a student's performance on various goals, patterns will become evident. This will aid in planning for instruction, grouping for instruction, and identification of the need for additional informal assessment.

Guidelines for interpretation and use

Using informal assessment successfully depends not only on the organized use of a variety of measures for assessment, but also on the accurate interpretation of the information gathered. Sound informal assessment takes place within the processes of reading, writing, speaking, and listening and during both teaching and application of instruction. The focus is on " ... the orchestration,

integration, and application of skills in meaningful contexts" (Valencia, 1990). The measure used reflects the learning activity itself and " ... is anchored in authenticity --- authenticity of tasks, texts, and contexts" (Valencia, 1990). Assessment is continuous and takes place "... in a variety of settings to ensure that one does not wrongly overgeneralize about a child's capabilities" (Teale, 1988). Evaluation based on the collection of assessment measures focuses on a pattern of behaviors rather than isolated events. The clues to learners' strengths as well as needs are in the pattern of behaviors observed. This alleviates comparison among learners and allows for the evaluation of progress of individual students. These patterns are easily identified if teachers use an organized system for collecting informal assessment. The organizational sheet (see Figure 5) provides the teacher with a summary of identified goals, instructional strategies for reaching the goals, and informal assessment measures used over a period of time to evaluate progress. It also provides a comments section where patterns of both progress and needs are listed. For example, if a student's organizational sheet indicates difficulty with "comparing and contrasting" on two or more assessment measures, then it is probably necessary to provide additional instruction in "comparing and contrasting". After instruction, additional informal assessment should occur where patterns of behavior are again observed.

Students with similar goals on the organizational sheet can be grouped for instruction. Students with similar needs can be grouped for remedial mini-lessons. These groups are temporary and change as students' goals and needs change. For individual students, the teacher can easily determine the variety of strategies used to accomplish each instructional goal, the time period for evaluation of the goal, and if a variety of informal assessment measures have been used.

The organizational sheet is a excellent guide for parent/teacher conferences. The teacher can show the parents specific examples of work from the expandable portfolio using the organizational sheet as a guideline for discussion of patterns of specific strengths and needs. It is also an excellent guide for teacher/student conferences where patterns of strengths and weaknesses can be discussed. Students can play an active role in suggesting procedures for remediation and further informal assessment.

Conclusion

Instructional decision making should include a variety of informal assessment measures. As teachers become observers and recorders of information over time, they learn more and more about their students and the environment of their classroom. They use the collected information to guide decision making for development of curriculum for the class as a whole and for individual students. The

organizational sheet aids in forming groups for both instruction of common goals and instruction of needs. Using multiple measures in an organized, systematic procedure allows teachers to make accurate, informed decisions based on various assessment instruments. Organized informal assessment empowers teachers to make judgments based on the processes of literacy --- reading, writing, speaking, and listening in a natural instructional environment.

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DATE	CHILD'S NAME	COMMENTS
3/4	Mary	Assumed leadership role during small group discussion. Corrected all punctuation marks during "editing" today.
3/7	Mary	Continued leadership role; Concerned with content in new story — having difficulty getting ideas on paper.
3/8	Mary	More "successful" with story today — her confidence is building. Helped "editing" partner with punctuation.

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FIGURE 1 -- ANECDOTAL RECORD

One cold (winter) day, a good friend came to my house to play. Soon after he arrived, snow started began to fall. Within a few hours, we had so much snow that my friend was unable unhappy to get go home. He spent the next two days at my house home.

self corrected →

FIGURE 2 -- MISCUE ANALYSIS

TEXT SAID	CHILD SAID (CIRCLE IF SELF CORRECTED)	LOSS OF MEANING	NO LOSS OF MEANING
winter	omitted word		✓
began	(started)		✓
unable	unhappy	✓	
get	go	✓	
house	home		✓
SUMMARY	5	2	3

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FIGURE 3 – RUNNING RECORD CHECKLIST

KEY: C = Control DC = Development of Control LC = Lack of Control / COMMENTS

DATE	USE OF VOCABULARY	COMPLETE SENTENCES	PUNCTUATION	GRAMMAR
SAMPLE ONE 3/11	DC / uses a variety of words	DC / 3 out of 4 are complete	LC / needs mini lesson	DC / sentence grammatically correct
SAMPLE TWO 3/12	DC / similar use as in sample 1	C / all complete	DC / still needs help with "?"	DC / sentence structure good
SAMPLE THREE 3/14	DC / using words from content areas more	C / ———	DC / much better — can see progress	DC / sentence structure good; capitalization good
SAMPLE FOUR				
SAMPLE FIVE				
SAMPLE SIX				
SAMPLE SEVEN				
SAMPLE EIGHT				
SAMPLE NINE				
SAMPLE TEN				
SAMPLE ELEVEN				

FIGURE 4 WRITING SAMPLE CHECKLIST

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KEY: R = required evidence S = supporting evidence

DATE	GOAL FOR INSTRUCTION	INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES	ASSESSMENT MEASURE	COMMENTS
3/4	Comparing / Contrasting 2 Bks. by K. Patterson	Story map — How texts are alike & different	(R) Student's work showing story map — collected 3/5	Listed 5 ways texts are alike. Omitted differences.
3/5	"	Small group discussion of how texts are alike & different	(R) observational checklist 3/5	Limited participation. Needs mini lesson in comp / contrast
3/7	"	Response to rdging: Description of main characters for each book	(R) Written response collected 3/8	Very thorough description of each char.
3/10	Writing using: - complete sentences - punctuation	Writing: New ending to one of Patterson books	(R) See writing samples — 3/11 ; 3/12 ; 3/14	Complete sentences Progress with punctuation. - p^a Note

FIGURE 5 -- ORGANIZATIONAL SHEET

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